



SUCCESS STORY

CO-OP WAREHOUSES: Storing Grains, Spreading Peace



Lalejandro

"This area used to be a war zone. Out of necessity, people lived here. But they were always prepared to evacuate whenever a gun battle erupted between government troops and rebel fighters," recalls Nawira Rasdi, the chairperson of the Bangsamoro Women Foundation for Peace and Development (BMWFPD), a non-government organization (NGO) which is focused on helping sustain the benefits of the 1996 peace accord by assisting former Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) combatants improve their standard of living.

Nawira's recollections are still vivid, but she is quick to say that these are all "a thing of the past." Their guns are now safely locked in their closets and have given way to more productive instruments – ploughshares. After the signing of the 1996 peace agreement between the MNLF and the Philippine government, these former combatants successfully re-entered mainstream society as productive rice, corn producers and seaweed farmers. For Nawira's people, improving their livelihood and increasing income levels has taken center stage.

An important resource to support the livelihood of these former MNLF combatants is the Community Infrastructure Program (CIP) of the USAID-funded Growth With Equity in Mindanao (GEM) Program. CIP projects are aimed at promoting economic growth and helping consolidate peace in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) and nearby conflict-affected areas.

Grains warehouses equipped with adjacent solar dryers are among the CIP projects that are creating a strong, positive impact on the economic life of the beneficiary communities. By enabling farmers to store and consolidate their harvest, they are often able to negotiate better prices for the produce. The warehouses improve the productivity and profitability for the farmers, and thus encourage expansion of agricultural production in the communities.

"Before, our cooperative members were forced to sell un-dried or poorly dried grains at very low prices. With the grains warehouse and solar dryer provided by GEM, they are now able to dry their grains within two or three days, properly store them, and, consequently, obtain much better prices for their efforts. Incomes are higher now" says Hadja Omaira Saripada, Chairperson and founder of the Wao MNLF Women's Multi-Purpose Cooperative, in Barangay Pilintangan, Wao, Lanao del Sur, Mindanao.

Another beneficiary of a grains warehouse and solar dryer in Barangay Rorogagus, Marawi City, declares that, "These facilities gives people hope that by choosing peace, they stand a better chance of improving their economic conditions and breaking from the cycle of poverty that has afflicted them and their communities."

"What we are doing here is planting the seeds for future economic activity," explains Noel Ruiz, program manager of the Livelihood Enhancement and Peace (LEAP) Program, the sister program of GEM.

"For instance, a grains warehouse will not only provide farmers a place where they can store their produce. It becomes a visible magnet for people to converge and do business. There will be more opportunity for others to participate - buyers, traders and ancillary services will come in," says Ruiz.

GEM's CIP projects also include water systems, boat landings, culverts, community centers, bridges and roadway upgrades. The total project cost for a CIP may not exceed P1.5 million.

In assessing the impact of GEM's infrastructure program on peace and development efforts in Mindanao, GEM Chief of Party Dr. Charles Feibel, notes that CIPs by themselves are "a vote of confidence" in communities where projects are located.

"People looking at these communities from the outside – whether they are donors, investors or contractors – will be convinced that these projects can be successfully completed on time and without problems."

GEM's efforts are helping establish the foundations for sustainable peace and prosperity, making it possible for residents to imagine the day when the ARMM - and the rest of Mindanao - move beyond mere 'potential' and into the real world of sustainable economic growth and development.

(Luis Mendoza, GEM Infocenter)